

Plenary Session I -- Innocence and Scandal: Sexuality and the Mass Media

Sex Scandal and the Mundane

Response to "*I did not have sex with*Politics, Media and Controversy"

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Thank you. I hope you don't mind my dedication of the following discussion to the fond memories many of us have of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick who passed away three days ago. I'm sure her inspiration and wisdom will continue to be an important force behind our efforts and struggles in the field of sexuality studies.

Professor Manderson's insightful paper presents an interesting take on the question of contested innocence, putting it in the context of politics, media and controversy. I myself am interested in another line of thought that relates contested innocence directly to the question of sexual agency of the young, which I hope to get to at the end of my own discussion. For the time being, I would like to add two additional points to further the implications of Professor Manderson's discussion. The first one has to do with the prominent factor of "gender" that usually affects media depictions of sex scandals. And the second point will discuss a more mundane kind of media construction of sex scandals that have led to serious consequences for non-normative and marginal sexualities.

Sex scandals involving politicians often portray the men as using their position and power to exercise their sexual agency at the expense of the other parties, who are described as the inexperienced and weak and thus are considered the unwitting victims of the scandal. In fact, the power differential itself constitutes an important part of the scandal. But what if the other party involved is also a politician and a woman of power herself? Let me turn to the most recent sex scandal in Taiwan involving not one but two well-known politicians. For the past three years, one woman legislator representing the aboriginal constituency has been rumored to be having an affair with a married man, a deputy county

magistrate—although there has been only circumstantial evidence that seems to point at an unusually close friendship, as they were seen going to concerts together, having dinners together, but nothing more than that. Still, this woman legislator has been the target of paparazzi reports constantly because of her fame as an ex-singer and actress, because of her militant and outspoken position on aboriginal rights and environment issues, and most importantly because of her identity as a good-looking, single woman in her forties who had dated quite a few celebrated men. On March 18th, tabloid media released a picture of the woman legislator looking at some property with the married deputy county magistrate; and it was quickly speculated that the couple might be planning to move in together despite the man's marital status. Though the story was never confirmed, the scandal raged so high that, at the persistent incitement of the media, the once-silent wife and even the brother of the deputy magistrate, himself a legislator, both publicly appealed for the couple to stop seeing each other and put an end to the whole scandal. Under pressure from his party that is keen on winning the next election, the deputy magistrate resigned from his post to avoid further damage to the image of the party; but the non-affiliated woman legislator has been resisting pressure to resign, claiming that her private life is off limits to the press. It is obvious from the camera shots that she is under great stress.

It is understandable that in the highly patriarchal Asian cultures, sex in relation to man and to woman still carry very different values. For while the media hardly feels the need to speculate about the deputy magistrate's motivation in continuing to see the woman legislator despite public scandal—everyone seems to agree that, like Clinton, men have their natural needs and weaknesses; the woman legislator, on the other hand, as a woman well-known for her resilience in face of difficulties and her power to mobilize the aboriginal tribes, is portrayed through detailed accounts of her many alleged romantic entanglements, thus insinuating that she is a persistently lustful temptress, a woman who steals other women's happiness and brings down any man she comes into close contact with, as testified by the magistrate's untimely resignation. What's worse, the woman legislator stubbornly refuses to explain the nature of their relationship despite repeated media inquisition; nor would she consent to sobbingly apologize to the man's family or the public as other alleged adulterers have done in front of the camera. Her refusal to cooperate with the conventional script of triangular melodrama leaves the media both anxious and impatient, thus leading to increasingly unsympathetic commentaries. It seems that the stronger the woman involved in the scandal, politician or not, the more likely she will be

assigned to bear the bulk of the blame.

Incidentally, there IS a conspicuous presence of increasingly powerful feminist agenda in Taiwan, in the middle of a state apparatus that aspires toward international status through the adoption of gender-mainstreaming as a national policy. Yet such feminist presence does not seem to have much bearing on the outcome of sex-related news when they involve independent adult women caught in non-normative relationships. Years of feminist discursive formations surrounding women's sexual vulnerability, to the exclusion of any positive statements on women's sexual power and pleasure, have constructed very limited narrative choices for such scandals. Worse, the mainstream feminist position, in the spirit of protecting women, boils down to an assertion of the most traditional concept of faithful and loyal couple-dom, whether sanctified by the ritualistic contract of marriage or by the expectations of mutually exclusive romantic love. As it stands now, the nuclear family, heterosexual marriage, and one-on-one relationships continue to keep mainstream feminists and women's groups from facing up to the fluid realities of today's intimate relationships, not to mention supporting women who choose to venture into relationships outside the safe haven of marriage. If it were not for the aggressive intervention of marginal sex rights groups and sex radicals, sexually autonomous women would still be isolated and condemned, and sex scandals would be simply more occasions for the reiteration of existing gender/sexual prejudices.

Now I would like to turn to my second point. The cases mentioned in Professor Manderson's paper, from President Clinton to Deputy Prime Minister Anwar to President Zuma, involved not only members of the male gender but also those at the very top of political hierarchies. As elite politicians, situated quite distant from the daily lives of the general public, the cases were looked upon by the media, and the public alike, as incidents uniquely associated with extraordinary individuals. The outcome of these media events thus has the most impact mainly for the political, but rarely touches upon the social. Clinton's scandal certainly did not alarm any adulterer in the US; and Zuma's scandal probably did not shake up the rapists in Africa or anywhere else. Anwar's arrest is the only incident that could signal to gays in Malaysia that their existence may enter upon greater danger due to the concretization of sexual stigma through this litigation. In most cases, though, the privileged position of these top politicians seems to develop into a buffer that keeps the general public safe from the fall-out of the scandal so that people can continue to watch from the comfort of their living rooms as the hated/envied politicians are dragged through the mud.

There is, however, another breed of sex scandals that often result in broad and serious consequences for a much wider population. These are the sex scandals that are reported both in the regular and the tabloid media that increasingly feature, not celebrities, but ordinary citizens who were, for example, scandalized for being found out to be practicing certain marginal sexualities such as SM or cross-dressing, for being documented with frequent visitations to porno websites, for leaving explicit sexual invitations on the internet, for being caught in police raids on gay orgies, for buying used underwear through the web, for being exposed as playing alleged Casanova on the internet, or for other sexual activities on a growing list of excursions, deviations, or unusual perversions. Along the same media logic of constructing the out-of-the-ordinary or the lesser-known as news-worthy, numerous reports pursue the newly emergent sex games in night clubs, search for new forms of sexual encounter on the internet, and warn the public about video games or comic books that feature problematic sexual contents, etc. In a narrative language that consistently interpellates an imaginary innocence vulnerable to and easily shocked by anything mildly out of the ordinary, media reports of these minor scandals feature ordinary folks conducting allegedly shameful and compromising activities, unsuspecting to the general public. What follows then is quite familiar to many of us. The intrusion of the sensationally sexual into the mundane and routine part of life lends itself easily to the fanning of moral panics that, at the urge of the conservative religious groups, phrased in support of the uncontested cause of child protection, leads to the creation of new regulations or legislations that consolidate conservative sexual mores and sexual attitudes through criminalizing information and discussion about non-normative sexual practices as well as aggressive sexual communication through the internet.

When I gave a talk at Columbia University in 2007, I lashed out against this growing regime of child protection causes that has resulted in serious infringements upon basic freedoms and human rights of adults and children alike. The connection between some kind of representation, some form of expression, and actual behavior seems to arouse extreme anxiety, social revulsion, and eventually state repression. And in the name of keeping harmful information out of children's reach, media and net space are increasingly purified through net police surveillance or imposed self-censorship; information exchange in any form is increasingly surveyed and monitored; claims of sexual agency and sexual freedom are instantly discredited and criticized. Professor Manderson is hopeful in her paper that the new media "allows multiple voices in various registers.... to reduce stigma, protect individual safety, and

support dignity and citizenship,” and she holds out an optimistic view of the role of all media in “providing contexts and spaces for civil engagement and enabling debate” (11). My friend in New York says, however, that in the US it is becoming ever more difficult to raise such dissenting voices as child protection rises to be an uncontestable royal imperative. All the more in Taiwan.

Yet it is also at critical moments like these that we are reminded of another important thing about media constructed sex scandals: they have great power in disseminating and advertising the lesser-known and the marginal to a much larger crowd than before, thus breaking the exclusion and silencing of the non-normative. Once a novelty taboo item enters the media, it is hard to say who will be touched and how much interest will be generated. Furthermore, the emergence of the marginal into mainstream media, even in the form of a scandal, not only opens up social space for public discussions of the taboo subject of sex, but also affords radical views a point of entry and intervention into social discourse. Perhaps this is exactly what bothers the conservative groups about media reports on sex scandals and why they would introduce new regulations and legislations to purify both the media and the internet.

Interestingly, it is this blanket blockage and surveillance of information through the strong arm of the law that has now provoked discontent among populations that used to be insulated from the political. More and more net citizens, who used to just live in their world of virtuality, are now expressing fierce discontent against conservative measures that directly bear upon their freedom of information and exchange. And their discourse is now building toward challenging the seemingly benevolent cause of child protection through exposing the absurdity of the imagined innocence that has never been the lot of numerous youngsters on the internet. How this newly politicized population can be mobilized to enter sexual contestations in the real world will be a serious task for us.

Sex scandals that involve politicians may be entertaining or distasteful, but it is the mundane sex scandals that have brought on a new kind of volatility that holds out opportunities of social mobilization to contest notions of innocence and sexual agency, two things that I am sure many of us would be very much interested in. Thank you.